

Illusions 31

Chapter 31

Just then, another faint pink line began to slowly emerge on the pregnancy test.

It wasn't clear, but it seemed to be a faint positive.

She was pregnant.

Lizetta's legs gave way; she plopped down on the toilet seat cover, staring into space at that soft pink line.

Yolanda snatched the pregnancy test, and her hands were shaking with fury, "Damn it, where the hell was Remington hiding when they were handing out human decency? Knocking up two women at the same time? That bastard can really pull some shit!"

She squatted down and wrapped her arms around Lizetta, "Liz, what's your game plan? You gonna keep the baby?"

Lizetta didn't have a clue.

She had promised Remington that they wouldn't have kids after they got married, but deep down she was dying for one.

She was desperate for a baby to validate her relationship with Remington.

She had even thought that maybe, just maybe, if she had his child, Remington would finally accept her as his wife and start to fall for her.

Now she knew how foolish and demeaning that thought was, and she was determined to let it go.

But just her luck, the baby decided to come now.

Just as Lizetta was a mess, her phone rang; wanting a break from her thoughts, she answered the phone immediately without even having looked at the caller's ID.

"Maestro Adagio? This is Evelina, I'm reaching out about setting up a music deal. I believe. William from The Dashiell Group made it clear, money ain't an issue. If you're not satisfied, we can up the ante."

Lizetta's phone was dual-SIM, and Evelina contacting this number meant she was reaching out to her alias.

Lizetta frowned, and just as she was about to hang up, Evelina raised her voice.

"With The Dashiell Group and the entire Starlight Group backing me, your music will get the promotion it truly deserves. There are plenty of talented folks out there, but talent alone won't cut it. On the flip side, there are a dime a dozen cases of people getting sidelined or blacklisted because they were too cocky to seize their chance. Isn't that right?"

Evelina was basically threatening to blacklist Lizetta

music career would be dead in the water.

Lizetta remained cool as a cucumber.

Yolanda, feeling like she was to burst a blood vessel, grabbed the phone and let loose.

"Excuse me? This is the first time I've heard someone make having a sugar daddy sound so fresh and innocent! Do you even know your own level? If our Maestro Adagio gives you his music, do you seriously think your amateur fiddling is gonna do it justice? Why drop The Dashiell Group's name in a music deal; do you think the world revolves around you? With your crappy skills, you're just looking for

a shortcut. The way I see it, if you ain't got the talent, all the effort in the world's just gonna make it hurt more. Better tuck yourself in and call it a night, and stop harassing us!"

Yolanda unleashed her tirade and cut the call.

Worried, she looked at Lizetta, who had just found out about her pregnancy and was now dealing with the brazen mistress who had knocked at her door, especially since that jerk. was backing the mistress to steal her creative work.

Yolanda feared Lizetta couldn't handle it all.

But Lizetta just chuckled; he stood up from the toilet seat, and playfully ruffled Yolanda's hair.

"Let's go.

I'm not in the mood for instant noodles anymore. Let's hit up a restaurant; I gotta treat your golden mouth right."

Lizetta linked arms with Yolanda and headed out the door.

Seeing Lizetta's carefree attitude, Yolanda breathed a sigh of relief and nodded.

"You're right. You've got a special condition now; you need to eat something nutritious. And we gotta find a step-daddy for Remington's kid."

The two of them stormed out the door, leaving a trembling Evelina back in the hospital

room.

"She's just a no-name composer; does she really think she's some sort of maestro? I was doing her a favor by offering a deal, and you heard the crap she just spewed!"

April tried to calm her down, but Evelina wasn't listening.

She could never forget the first time she saw Lizetta; she was in a bun, wearing a pink and white princess dress, barefoot on the couch, playing the violin.

The music was enchanting, it was like seeing a princess in a castle.

But that should have been her life!

All these years, she stuck with the violin with the single goal to crush Lizetta.

But she was only average in talent Elara was a dancer, and she, Evelina, is the biological daughter. But the one who inherited the musical and dancing talents somehow seemed to belong to Lizetta, the fake heiress!

No matter how hard she tried over the years, she always fell short. The fleeting look of disappointment in her mother's eyes fueled Evelina's burning jealousy and hatred towards

Lizetta.

Now that she was back in the country to develop her career, she wanted to dazzle everyone at her first solo concert. Classic violin pieces were too easy to reveal her technical shortcomings.

She had set her sights on Maestro Adagio, since one of his works, a hip-hop infused piece, helped a young violinist win a prestigious international prize last year.

Chapter 32

This tune is such a breath of fresh air, and it's just what she needed to make up for her shortcomings on the violin and enable her to really knock people's socks off.

I've got this piece in the bag!"

Evelina's eyes were icy as she stared down William from the Dashiell Group.

"William, the big boss handed this off to you, and I couldn't care less how you get it done—I just want results. If you can't handle this little thing and get the boot, don't come crying to me."

"Don't worry, Ms. Hawthorne, I'll hunt down her and have a good talk with her."

Lizetta had been job hunting for two days without any luck; clearly, Remington was trying to strong-arm her into throwing in the towel and coming back.

Knowing she had hit a dead end with the usual job agencies, Lizetta decided to think outside the box and asked Yolanda to keep an eye out for other part-time gigs.

Back in the day, this girl got bullied too and vowed to become a knight in shining armor, SO that she could protect both herself and Lizetta. She'd sneak into martial arts classes whenever she could.

Turns out she was a natural, and even got into film school on a martial arts scholarship.

Now she's a stunt double on set, and has been added to a bunch of extras and crew

groups

She's a social butterfly, who knows a ton of people, so in no time, she found Lizetta three part-time jobs.

Lizetta had been so busy with the side hustles that she hadn't visited the hospital for days, but today she brought two homemade meals with her.

She dropped off the first meal for Joseph and then headed upstairs with the second.

She had promised Hogan she'd cook for him, so she took the chance while spoiling Joseph to make Hogan a packed lunch too.

As she approached the elevator, the doors opened, and out stepped Remington and Evelina, side by side.

Not wanting to bump into them, Lizetta quickly ducked into the nearby stairwell.

"Oops!" Evelina stumbled near the stairwell.

Remington caught her in time, "Be careful."

"These heels seem a bit slippery."

have someone bring you another pair."

Remi, you don't have to be so delicate with me, I'm not made of glass."

The familiar voice of the man and Evelina's honeyed tones drifted away gradually.

Lizetta leaned against the wall, with her nails scratching against it in frustration, and thought about how much Remington cared about the child in Evelina's belly.

Remington entered Joseph's room first, while Evelina lingered, while casting a seemingly casual glance towards the stairwell with a sly smile on her lips.

She had seen Lizetta.

It took Lizetta a moment to emerge.

She went upstairs, but Hogan was still in surgery, so she visited Thaddeus' room first.

Taking over from the caregiver Zora, she massaged Thaddeus' legs.

As Thaddeus had been in a coma for six months, his muscles became atrophied and thin. Lizetta massaged him, while recalling the last time she saw her brother before the accident.

He was excited about a big financial case he was handling. He said once it was done, he could buy a two-bedroom apartment.

"Then you'll have a place to call home, Liz. If you're ever unhappy with the Dashiell family, just come back. I can take care of you forever."

He had smiled warmly while patting her head.

But the case never closed, and her brother had an accident. As she wiped his face with a towel, she teased, "Are you staying asleep just to avoid buying me that house? Listen up, my material desires only grow with age. If you don't wake up, I won't settle for a two-bedroom—I'll need at least a four-bedroom flat!"

"You're low-balling your brother, why not aim for a lakeside villa?"

Hearing a teasing voice from behind, Lizetta turned to see Hogan, which made her

slightly with a smile.

"You haven't had dinner yet, right? I brought some food."

blush

“How about we enjoy it in the garden downstairs? The air’s nice today,” Hogan suggested, while picking up the thermal container.

The hospital garden was lush with green grass, and the evening breeze carried the warmth of late summer and a hint of earthy fragrance.

Hogan, being gracious, ate neatly but clearly savored the meal.

Lizetta sat next to the bench, and as she was about to inquire about Thaddeus’ overseas

treatment, an annoyed voice came from behind.

“Sister?”

Lizetta turned to see Evelina in a hospital gown.

The tall figure standing beside her was none other than Remington, with Cedric behind him holding a lady’s cashmere shawl.

The man exuded his usual chill, and his presence, being frosty and cold, seemed to bring an early autumn to the corner.

Evelina’s gaze lingered meaningfully on Lizetta and Hogan.

“Sister, you’re still so likable, and your friends are all so impressive. Who’s this?”

Lizetta’s face turned cold, “You’re still as unlikeable as ever, always talking in riddles.”

Evelina looked all woebegone as she stepped forward.

Liz, are you still ticked off about what happened last time? I'm sorry, okay? It was my pregnancy messing with my appetite, and me being all weak and hypoglycemic that made me fall and Remi thought you pushed me. He's just super protective of the baby. Liz, I'm seriously saying sorry here. Can you forgive me?"

She was skinny as a rail, with a plain face and features that weren't anything to write home about individually, but together, they kinda worked—in a lost—little—lamb sorta way, especially with that pure, innocent look plastered on her face.

Right then, she was the picture of sincerity, which made it hard for anyone to give her a hard time. But Lizetta? She saw right through it, seeing nothing but bad news.

She couldn't stand Evelina pulling that act, as she still remembered their first meeting clear as day.

Evelina had been led into the Hawthorne family's living room by Elara, where she had gone straight for Lizetta with a hug, then quickly let go, all jittery, apologizing.

"Liz, I'm so sorry, did I get your dress dirty? I swear it wasn't on purpose."

Before Lizetta even got a grip on what was going on, Elara, all heartache and worry, scooped Evelina up and glared at her.

"Mommy, who's this?"

Little Lizetta didn't get why her mom was cuddling some other kid, and just asked, but Evelina freaked out like a startled deer.

"Does Liz not like me? I'm sorry, I'll just go."

Elara had whisked Evelina away, and turned sharply to Lizetta: “Don’t call me mom anymore, I’m not your mother!”

Years had passed, and Evelina hadn’t changed a bit.

Lizetta quirked a lip, “Fine, take a bow then.”

Evelina was stunned, and Lizetta was dripping with sarcasm.

“You’re the one making a big show of apologizing. I’d be letting you down if I didn’t let you take a bow to match your earnestness.”

As if Evelina would go for that.

With tears brimming, she turned with a pleading look to Remington.

Lizetta followed her gaze, and her clear eyes landed on Remington.

There he was, with that deep, unfathomable look. Lizetta was wearing a daffodil–yellow dress that day, with her hair casually clipped up, and a couple of strands falling softly beside her face, making her skin look even more charming.

As she sat next to Hogan, her dress swayed and brushed against his sult pants, and she looked every bit the docile wife.

This woman, who had bolted from home for eight days, not to mention hopping on some random dude’s motorcycle that night, was now delivering love–packed lunches to another

man.

Remington noticed a dish of sweet and sour crispy eggplant in the lunch box—a dish that’s simple, but a real hassle to make. She really went all out.

His already icy demeanor seemed to drop a few more degrees.

“That day was my misunderstanding, and it had nothing to do with Evelina! Since you slapped her, you’ve blew off some steam; don’t be someone who can’t let things go.”

Lizetta’s heart squeezed. She didn’t know what she was expecting; why would she think Remington gotta be any different from Elara back then.

Pfft.

Before Lizetta could respond, Hogan stood up and spoke.

“Mr. Dashiell, you’ve got it wrong. If someone without a leg to stand on still tries to argue their case, why should someone in the right have to let it slide?”

Their gazes clashed across the room, almost like a standoff with blades drawn.

Remington’s thin lips quirked slightly, “Dr. White, that ain’t right either. What matters between spouses isn’t about being right or wrong; it’s about caring for each other. Liz, come here.”

He turned his gaze to Lizetta and beckoned her with his hand.

Staring at his outstretched palm, Lizetta felt her heart was being squeezed.

He said what mattered was caring for each other, but did he even care about her?

If he did, what was Evelina to him?

But his words and look were so damn misleading, making Lizetta's head spin and tempting her to reach out and take his hand.

But before Lizetta could react, Evelina had butted in between her and Remington, all frantic.

"Remi, Dr. White, please, no more fighting. I'll bow and apologize to Liz."

Evelina bent over to bow, and that's when a shrill and vicious shout cut through the air.

"Hogan, you heartless quack! You let my son die, you owe me his life!"

With that scream, a middle-aged man in a long-sleeved black shirt yanked a knife from his clothes and started waving it around like a maniac.

Lizetta, with her back to the commotion, instinctively turned around, only to see a flash of steel heading straight for her face.

"Ah! Remi! Save me!"

In the chaos, she heard Evelina's scream. Remington must have gone to save her.

Lizetta's heart sank; her body tensed up, and her mind went blank. She barely had time to close her eyes, almost resigned to waiting for the knife to strike.

But the anticipated pain never came.

Chapter 34

Lizetta just felt herself yanked away by a strong force, and the next second, she was enveloped in a comforting and warm embrace.

She breathed in the cool fragrance of the man, like frosty pines on snowy peaks, with a power to soothe the soul.

Lizetta looked up incredulously into Remington's deep eyes. For a moment, it was as if she could only see her own reflection in his gaze.

"Scared stiff, huh? It's all good now."

His large hand caressed the top of her head, and his voice was soft and low.

Lizetta stared at him dumbfounded, feeling her heart racing as if it might burst out of her chest, yet she was unsure whether it was due to his gentleness now or the shock from

before.

She lifted her hand and clung tightly to Remington's waist.

Evelina, collapsed in Cedric's arms, turned her head and caught this scene.

In the nick of time just before, she had thrown herself at Remington, yet he didn't hesitate to toss her aside. If Cedric hadn't caught her, who knows how embarrassed she'd be right

now.

Evelina even suspected that if she hadn't been between Remington and Lizetta, he wouldn't have bothered to toss her aside; his eyes were only for Lizetta!

Now, as Evelina saw Remington and Lizetta in each other's arms, jealousy burned in the depths of her eyes.

She hurried forward. "How can there be such a lunatic in the hospital? It's a good thing Remi pushed me away! Oh my God, Remi is hurt!"

Brought back to reality by the noise, Lizetta finally noticed a gash on Remington's right

arm.

The suit jacket and white shirt were torn, with blood dripping steadily—which was a shocking sight.

Evelina clutched Remington's arm, with tears falling like rain.

"It's all my fault, if it weren't for pushing me out of the way, you wouldn't have been hurt."

So he had made sure Evelina was safe before saving her? This injury was also for Evelina's sake.

"LE are you okay?"

Remington had shielded Lizette and kicked the attacker away. The guy tried to get up but Hogan delivered an extra kick and pinned him down with his hands behind his back on the ground.

Now that security had taken control of the situation, Hogan finally got a chance to check in on Lizetta.

Lizetta shook her head at him. "I'm fine, and my senior brother is—Ouch!"

She didn't get to finish her sentence as a man's strong grip clenched her waist, and his fingers dug into the soft flesh there; the pain it caused made her whimper.

After the security came to ask Hogan to handle the aftermath, he apologized to Lizetta.

“The guy’s son had late–stage brain cancer, and was now not eligible for surgery. He begged me on his knees yesterday to operate, but I had to refuse. His son passed away this morning. Sorry for dragging you into this. I’ll have a colleague take care of Mr. Dashiell’s wound.”

He turned to call a nurse over, then hurried off with security.

“Ouch, Remi, does it hurt?”

Evelina, still crying, blocked the nurse.

Lizetta’s eyes were cold as she yanked Evelina away.

“He’s not dead yet, and your tears aren’t antiseptic, so spare him the extra moisture if you want him to heal faster!”

Remington looked down at Lizetta with a flicker of amusement in his eyes.

She was like a little cat guarding her food, and it was kind of adorable.

Evelina staggered back a couple of steps, and accused Lizetta with tearful eyes.

“Remi got hurt because of me, so why can’t I cry?”

Remington, getting a headache from the noise, glanced coldly at Cedric and ordered.

“Take her back to her room.”

Cedric quickly stepped forward, and draped a shawl over Evelina. “Ms. Hawthorne, let me escort you.”

Evelina didn't want to leave; she didn't want Lizetta and Remington alone together. She showed a pained expression, supporting her belly, and her face turned slightly pale.

"Remi.

Before she could finish, Remington said.

"Go rest. I'll come see you in a bit."

Evelina's eyes brightened, and without further fuss, she obediently nodded, turning to

Lizetta.

"Sis, since Remi doesn't take care of himself, please make sure the nurse bandages him up properly, okay?"

She gave Lizetta a concerned nod before turning to leave.

Lizetta pulled Remington to sit on the bench, gesturing for the head nurse to come over, and she couldn't help but murmur.

"This is quite the love scene."

Remington raised his arm to cooperate with the nurse to cut off the sleeve.

Hearing her words, he lifted his lids; his gaze was deep, and lips curled slightly.

"Jealous?"

Chapter 35

Lizetta glared at him; her almond-shaped eyes almost popped, "Can't you tell that I'm talking about taking gunpowder?"

Remington raised an eyebrow, "If you're so full of fire, just don't blow me up with you."

Lizetta was fuming, but the head nurse couldn't help but let out a chuckle.

Worried she might shake and hurt Remington further, Lizetta quickly told her, "Easy does

it."

The head nurse, a woman in her forties, couldn't help but smile at Lizetta and said, "You're all bark and no bite, sweetie. Relax, I'm a pro. Won't hurt your boyfriend. Besides, he's a big boy, can't he handle a little scratch?"

By then, Remington's sleeve was cut open, revealing his wound.

It was a good ten centimeters long cut, with his skin peeled back, which was quite bloody

to behold.

Lizetta's heart clenched, and she bit her lip. "That looks pretty bad, how can you say it's nothing? Nurse, please, no more chatting."

She was more nervous than the head nurse, and even more than the injured Remington.

The head nurse found it amusing, while Remington, somewhat resigned, reached out with his uninjured hand and clasped Lizetta's neck from behind.

With his warm touch, Lizetta was pulled into his chest, with her forehead against his heart. She couldn't see anything, and Remington's voice came from above, tinged with laughter, "It'll be over soon."

"Oh."

Lizetta nestled in his arms, listening to his steady and strong heartbeat, and for some reason, she felt a tinge of sourness in her nose.

She didn't move, and the nurse quickly disinfected the wound.

"Need to stitch this up."

The moment Lizetta heard about stitching, she anxiously tried to lift her head, but his big hand gently caressed her neck.

"Don't move."

The tingling sensation made Lizetta soften again, and Remington nodded at the nurse.

"Thanks, she's always been a drama queen, sorry for the laugh."

The head nurse worked skillfully; after finishing the stitching and applying medicine, she

took the gauze from a colleague and said with a smile, "You're lucky, having a girlfriend who cares about you so much."

Lizetta moved again, and Remington's thumb brushed her earlobe, pinching the reddened flesh.

"She's my wife."

The head nurse was a bit surprised, mainly because Lizetta looked just like a college girl

After she finished bandaging Remington, she stood up and pulled down her mask to speak.

“You need to cherish her, roping her in so young.”

The head nurse and her assistant left, and Remington let go of Lizetta. She looked up at him with a barely suppressed smile in her eyes.

Remington looked down, meeting her smiling eyes, whose curving looked pretty attractive

“What’s so funny?” His tone softened.

Lizetta blinked, “The nurse was implying you’re robbing the cradle, didn’t you catch that?”

Remington pursed his lips, thinking that the point of the nurse’s comment was to take good care of her, yet she sure knew how to pick up on things.

He leaned down, brushing his nose against Lizetta’s.

Their breath mingled in the intimate space and filled it with a palpable tension.

Lizetta stiffened, “What are you doing?”

Her voice trembled despite her efforts.

“Checking just how tender this grass is.”

Lizetta, embarrassed and annoyed, pushed him away.

The man let go, then he stood up and ruffled Lizetta's hair, "Stop fussing. I asked Cedric to tidy up for you. Head back to Oakridge Heights early, okay?"

Lizetta watched him; his arm was wrapped in bandages, and his torn suit jacket was draped over his shoulder, the evening light cast a warm, gentle hue over his broad shoulders and the sharp lines of his face, making him irresistibly handsome.

Her hand quietly rested on her belly, and she thought, for the baby's sake, maybe she should try again.

Pinching her palm with her fingertips, Lizetta asked almost timidly, "What about Evelina?"

Remington thought she was asking whether he would visit Evelina and, recalling Evelina's

gesture of holding her belly as she left, he said, "I'll check on her. You go ahead, I'll be back

soon.

Lizetta felt her heart turn cold in an instant. The warmth and flutter she felt moments ago turned to nothing because of his words.

She shook her head, "I'm not going back."

Remington's handsome face darkened, and as she stepped away, he grabbed her shoulder in a firm grip.

"Lizetta, what do you really want?! I'm hurt, shouldn't you move back in to take care of me?"

Lizetta found it funny, struggling to get free, "Weren't you injured for Evelina? Let her move in and take care of you, and she'd probably be happy with that."

Remington scoffed, "She's afraid of blood."

Lizetta was generous, afraid she couldn't push her husband out the door fast enough.

Indeed, Evelina had a fear of blood, supposedly from childhood trauma due to domestic violence by Hans, but Lizetta had been beaten even worse by Hans. Didn't she deserve to be traumatized?

Feeling her heart ached, Lizetta pulled her shoulder from Remington's grasp.

Chapter 36

"Sure, I'll head back, but I've got one condition."

She seemed to soften; as a result, Remington's face finally lightened up a bit, and his tightly pursed lips turned to relax.

"Name it." NôvelDrama.Org: owner of this content.

"There's this composer online, who goes by Maestro Adagio. He's got this new track, and I want it."

Lizetta stood tall, with her fists clenched.

She knew the kind of pull Remington had. She didn't want to hand that song over to Evelina, but if the Dashiell Group kept snooping around, they'd find her sooner or later, and they had ways to make her bend.

Remington didn't see it coming that Lizetta would bring up Maestro Adagio. His brows furrowed slightly.

That song was part of a deal he'd already hashed out with Evelina.

Plus, Evelina was dying for that track, and there was Lizetta, just lazing around at home, wanting that song just to spite Evelina. He said sternly, "Don't be a brat, that's a no-go. Pick something else."

Lizetta bit the tip of her tongue, tasting the bitter sweetness of blood.

She knew it she'd humiliated herself once again.

"Be a good girl. I snagged some top-notch blood diamonds in Celestia, and aren't you into Elsa's designs at Tiff, the up-and-coming jewelry designer? I'll have her whip up a bracelet for you."

He didn't finish his sentence when Lizetta cut him off.

"Give it to Evelina. She might not like blood, but she sure likes blood diamonds."

She started to walk away, not wanting to stay a moment longer.

Jewelry's great and all, but to someone like Remington, it's just the easiest way to sweet-talk someone without breaking a sweat.

He'd dig into Maestro Adagio's background just because Evelina wanted it.

But he never cared about what Lizetta wanted. Even when she mustered the courage to ask, all she got was disregard and lip service.

That fleeting tenderness just now was probably another ploy to coax her back.

Lizetta picked up the pace, soon breaking into a run.

Rounding the path, she bumped into someone.

Sorry!

Liz, what's wrong?"

Hogan's clear voice rang out. He'd finished his business but doubled back, feeling worried. Lizetta's eyes were red-rimmed; not wanting to be seen like this, she kept her head down.

"I just remembered I'm almost late for a part-time gig."

She tried to sidestep Hogan, but he stepped aside to let her pass, then he followed.

"I'll drive you."

Lizetta was hurting inside, not in the mood for chat, so she just quickened her steps.

Her emotional outburst took Remington by surprise, and it irked him.

He'd never tried so hard to keep someone around, yet she still wanted a divorce, as if every second with him was agony. Fine, then let her go a hard knock might just straighten her out!

But remembering the redness at the corners of her eyes as she left, Remington abruptly

started to follow.

That's when he saw in

and Hogan's silhouettes, one after the other, walking away.

The man's tall figure shielded the woman's, and their shadows merged in the setting sun.

A chill settled in Remington's eyes as he halted his steps.

Lizetta headed to Zion Theatre. Though she didn't join a dance company after graduation, Professor Blue, who taught her at university and valued her talent, was an honorary advisor of the theatre and allowed Lizetta to use the stage when it was free.

She'd sometimes come here to practice and record dance videos.

Linking her music to the sound system, she stood barefoot in the spotlight, and a violin's plaintive melody filled the air.

Pivoting on her right foot, she had her body sway and spin; her movements became more free and fluid, as graceful as a nymph skimming over water, as if she was defying gravity and dancing like a butterfly.

The music was sometimes sad, sometimes joyous, slow here, fervent there – just like Remington was to Lizetta.

A light of redemption, yet a descent into ash.

Remington had no clue about the pressure Lizetta had faced during his four-year absence.

All the online comments and slander, the defamation and insults, the Dashiell family's disapproval, the sneers and taunts, the belittling.

Her disrupted dance dreams, her brother's trouble, the weight too heavy for Lizetta's fragile twenty-year-old shoulders. She'd even developed mild depression, leading to severe insomnia.

This song was born out of an overdose of sleeping pills; when she woke to the chirping birds of dawn and thought of him in her dreams, her inspiration was sparked.

Lizetta danced with abandon; her face was indistinguishable between sweat and tears, all drenched.

Suddenly, the music stopped dead, and lights went blazing.

With her legs giving out, Lizetta fell to her knees; she was gasping for breath as she lifted her head.

A figure standing at the side door of the stage looked at her with a complex gaze.

Chapter 37

It was Evelina's mom, Elara.

Lizetta steadied her breath, slowly stood up, and called out.

"Mrs. Hawthorne."

Elara gave her a nod, walked over, picked up a towel from the front row of seats, and handed it to Lizetta.

"Thanks."

Lizetta took it, wiping the sweat and tears from her face, turning slightly to avoid showing Elara her disheveled state.

"Liz, I wanna have a chat with you."

Elara spoke up, and Lizetta turned around, having a hunch why she was there. Lizetta nodded and replied, "I'll just change some clothes and be right back."

Elara nodded, "Go ahead."

Lizetta took a quick shower, got changed, and came back to the venue. Elara was still in front of the stage. Lizetta walked over.

Elara didn't turn around, staring at the stage and said, "You remember, right? You snagged your first dance competition gold medal on this stage when you were just five. You were so tiny but already rock-solid, blew everyone away. I was so proud."

Back then, Lizetta was the little princess of the Hawthorne family, everyone said she was a chip off the old block but surpassed her parents; Elara had her successor, and Elara herself was excited to tears.

As a kid, Lizetta had been coddled and attentively groomed by Elara and Kevin. Had she been their own flesh and blood, she'd have been the luckiest little princess in the world, smooth sailing all the way up. But alas.

Lizetta knew Elara wasn't here to rekindle their broken mother-daughter bond. She asked outright, "Mrs. Hawthorne, you came to me for something, right?"

"Liz, you're a born dancer. The Dashiell family's only cramping your style and soul, and Remington doesn't love you./I hope you can continue to shine on stage."

Elara pulled out a check from her bag, "Here's 500 gránd, enough to set you up for studying abroad. Leave Zion City, will you?"

Lizetta looked at the check handed to her, feeling neither moved nor anything but humiliation and disappointment.

She knew Elara's plea for her to leave was to clear the path for Evelina. Even though she

knew she shouldn't take it to heart from those who ditched her, maybe the love she got too little, she still remembered the affection from her parents when she was a kid.

Sometimes she'd even wake from nightmares calling out for her mom.

Jolin was selfish and Indifferent, let Hans abuse her and took her frustrations out on Lizetta with needles. Lizetta never saw Jolin as her mom; it was Elara she called for.

But Elara had long given her up; she was a child without a mother.

Evelina was her own daughter. Lizetta held no grudges for being abandoned back then, but now, to step on her for her own daughter, to expect gratitude was too much.

Lizetta looked up, "Evelina got pregnant before marriage. Rather than worrying about my future, maybe you should focus more on teaching your own daughter, Mrs. Hawthorne."

Elara's face turned cold, her expression flitting with discomfort.

"Lizetta, it takes two to tango. Eve getting pregnant means a guy wanted her to. Four years ago, the Hawthorne family and the Dashiell family discussed marriage, and Remington had agreed. If you hadn't stepped in, Eve's child would be born into their wedded bliss!"

Lizetta clenched her fists, only knowing that four years ago everyone assumed Evelina and Remington were an item. But she didn't know Remington had agreed to tie the knot. NôvelDrama.Org: owner of this content.

"You owed Eve from childhood; you stole her marriage four years ago. Now that Eve's pregnant, it's time for you to step aside!"

Seeing Lizetta's peace, Elara frowned but her heart didn't soften; she stuffed the check

into Lizetta's hand.

Lizetta stepped back, her spine straight as it's stepping aside,

if ready to snap. "Ewan it Remington has to tell me himself."

Elara sighed, “Liz, consider it paying back the six years of care from me and my husband. I’m begging you to do right by Eve.”

Her face was full of love for Evelina, plotting for her daughter, but carelessly stabbing at Lizetta’s heart.

To do right by Evelina, but who was gonna do right by her? Lizetta’s throat tightened; Elara left the check on the chair and walked away quickly. As she gazed at Elara’s retreating figure, the last bit of warmth and admiration in her eyes vanished.

Elara was wrong; she owed nothing to the Hawthorne family. Their six years of love were for their daughter, not for Lizetta.

And now, by what right did they have to guilt–tripping her?

Elara left the building, the sky outside already dark, the Hawthorne family car parked

under a tree not far away. She was about to step forward when a voice called from

above.

Mrs. Hawthorne.”

Elara looked up; the second–floor window opened, and Lizetta’s beautiful face shone in the night, her hand slightly raised.

“Your generosity is too much for me to bear. Please take it back.”

The check fluttered to the ground by Elara’s feet as the window closed.

Elara's face turned ugly with anger and humiliation, mixed with an unspeakable dejection. Inside the car, Evelina, unable to wait, pushed the door open and ran over, "Mom, how did it go? Did she agree?"

Chapter 38

Lizetta was already on the brink of divorce, and now someone was throwing cash her way. There was no way she'd say no to that.

The moment Lizetta pocketed the dough, whether she went through with the divorce or not, Remington couldn't stand having wool pulled over his eyes. It was like she was planting a thorn right in his heart.

Elara shook her head, "Let's talk back in the car."

Evelina's heart sank in an instant. She thought that with Lizetta's soft spot for Elara, the old "motherly love" card, there was no way Lizetta could turn her down.

What an ungrateful snake! As the car started moving, Evelina's tears started flowing like a waterfall, and she threw herself into Elara's arms.

"Mom, I don't care that Lizetta got mad, slapped me, all of that jazz. But my belly's getting bigger by the day, and Remington, still hung up on Fiona, won't get a divorce.

How can I bear to have my child be the talk of the town? I had a rough enough childhood; I don't want my baby to be born into this cruel world."

Elara's heart was shattered, and she patted Evelina trying to comfort her, "Don't you worry I'm gonna make sure you get what you want."

After she sent Evelina to her hospital room and made sure she was asleep, Elara stepped out and made a call, her voice light, "Fancy grabbing a coffee when you're free?"

Night fell.

Fresh out of the shower, Lizetta counted her stash of cash again, furrowing her brow. As hard as she was hustling, saving money for regular folks was like watching paint dry. She was always spending more than she was saving.

She'd scraped together not even 30 grand. Who'd have thought Mrs. Dashiell would be scraping by like this?

Lizetta was feeling a bit down in the dumps, thinking, actually trading in that dirtbag for 500 grand didn't seem like such a bad deal.

Just as she was about to hit the hay after tidying up her stuff, her phone buzzed.

Yolanda had already knocked out, and Lizetta, not wanting to wake her, quickly answered the phone and headed to the balcony.

"Mrs. Dashiell, the boss might have an infected wound and seems to be running a fever. I'm sent out of town and can't make it back. Could you please rush over to Oakridge Heights to check on him?"

It was Cedric,

Lizette frowned, "What about Edith? She'll take care of him."

Can't reach Edith by phone. Mrs. Dashiell, please, go check on him. Nobody's answering his cell either; he might have passed out from the fever."

Cedric's voice was filled with urgency, and Lizetta started to worry too. She tried calling Edith and Remington, but no dice, no one was picking up.

Lizetta didn't dare delay, quickly changed and dashed to Oakridge Heights. As she stepped into the foyer, the villa was pitch black, not a soul around, like no one was home.

Lizetta started thinking maybe Cedric gave her the wrong address, that Remington wasn't even here.

She went upstairs, pushed open the bedroom door, and there was a nightlight on. Remington was propped up against the headboard, eyes closed, not sure if he was asleep

or not.

Seeing him there, Lizetta breathed a sigh of relief and hurried over. The moment her hand touched his forehead, Remington suddenly grabbed her wrist, his palm burning hot.

He'd definitely got a fever. Thinking he was awake, Lizetta leaned in, but then she saw his eyes were still tightly shut, his handsome face slightly flushed, breathing a bit labored clearly, he was out cold.

Couldn't let anyone touch him even in his sleep, huh? Lizetta chuckled to herself, tried to pull away, but Remington's grip was like iron.

"Let go," she touched his face with her other hand.

Perhaps the coolness of her hand comforted him, Remington nuzzled into her palm and mumbled, "Who's there?"

Sick Remington seemed kinda cute to Lizetta, but then she remembered Elara's words about it taking two to tango, and she was tempted to slap him again.

She leaned in closer, her voice soft, "It's mom, sweetie. Say 'mom', and I'll go get your medicine."

Before she could finish, he opened his eyes. His deep-set eyes were lucid and sharp, not a hint of grogginess.

Lizetta panicked; her instinct was to bolt. But the next second, he pulled her in forcefully, she lost her balance, fell on top of him, and he held her down tightly.

His feverish body heat scorched Lizetta, and she froze on spot.

“If I call you ‘mom’, would you dare respond?!”

Remington’s voice was hoarse with illness, but it was fierce in Lizetta’s ear.

Lizetta thought to herself, she’d have to hear that, but she didn’t dare say it out loud.

Instead, she said, “You’ve got a fever, let me go, and I’ll get you some medicine.”

Remington didn’t let go, instead, he rubbed his forehead against her neck and said, “You actually came back!”

There was anger in his tone, but Lizetta weirdly picked up a hint of hurt. It tugged at her heartstrings, and she pressed her lips, saying, “You’re not the one who took a bullet for Evelina. You should have her come take care of you. Mmm.”

He bit her ear, his burning heat enveloping her cool earlobe. Lizetta couldn’t tell if it was the heat or the pain that made her whimper, trembling lightly.

Remington released her ear and let out a raspy chuckle by her ear, “Are you a fool, believing anything anyone tells you?”

Chapter 39

What’s that supposed to mean?” The man’s breath was practically drilling into her ears, leaving Lizetta’s head all muddled.

Blind much? Figure it out yourself,” Remington snapped, shoving Lizetta away.

Lizetta stumbled, nearly taking a spill. She shot Remington a glance, “I’m going to get the -medicine.”

She quickly brought over some warm water and meds, helping Remington sit up.

“Did you take the fever reducer?”

Remington nodded slightly.

Since he couldn't take another fever reducer so soon, Lizetta picked it out, watched as he swallowed the anti-inflammatory pills, and then felt his forehead again.

“How come you're still burning up after the fever meds?”

Remington's eyes drooped, silent. He hadn't taken any medicine; he was just putting on an act because he was worried that if the fever went down, she would take off again.

“Just lie down, I'll get you an ice pack to cool off.”

As Lizetta tried to get up, Remington caught her wrist. With a tug, she toppled onto the bed, ending up in his arms.

His forehead pressed against the back of her neck, his arms wrapped around her waist, he spoke in a soothing tone.

“No need. You've got a cold heart and a colder touch, which is just as good for cooling down. Let's just sleep like this for a bit.”

She did tend to run cold; even in the summer her skin was cooler than most. As kids, whenever Remington got sick with a fever, he'd grab her hand to use as a cool touch.

And in winter, Lizetta liked to snuggle into Remington's arms. He ran hot, better than a hot water bottle.

She lay there quietly; time seemed to stretch out, calm and peaceful. At the thought of what he'd just said, Lizetta's mind flashed back to the danger in the hospital, the gleam of the sharp knife she'd closed her eyes to.

She asked softly, "You took that knife for me, didn't you?"

She held her breath, waiting, and after a while, a proud snort came from behind her, "Mm-hmm."

Lizetta's heart felt lighter, a smile creeping onto her lips. The situation back then was

chaotic. She hadn't expected Evelina, that scheming witch, to spout such nonsense right in front of Remington.

So, you realize you've been a thankless wretch, and you've got nothing to say for it?"

She kept quiet for a moment, and Remington's lips moved slightly. His lips brushed against her neck, a mix of ticklish and tantalizing; Lizetta felt her body heated up.

She bit her lip, resisting the tingling in her heart.

"But you were with Evelina for her birthday, showering her with gifts."

She cut herself off, biting her tongue. Too much frustration, jealousy felt like a waste of energy, and saying such things aloud made her feel ashamed.

Remington's voice carried a hint of helplessness.

"What did I give her? Didn't I come home to be with you that day? You're young but already forgetful, can't even remember where the gift is?"

Lizetta froze, then something clicked, and she tried to get up to check. But Remington tightened his grip, holding her close as if to meld her into his chest.

“Stay still, the gift isn’t going anywhere. Just stay with me; I’m in pain.”

Tears welled up in Lizetta’s eyes. So, he had prepared a gift for her too; it wasn’t all about Evelina.

Her heart fluttered with a mix of joy and sweetness, but then the thought of Evelina being pregnant turned all that sweetness bitter again.

She choked up, taking a moment before speaking.

“I know you don’t love me, that you married me out of obligation. So these past two years, I’ve tolerated being neglected and aggrieved, swallowed the bitterness, and never complained. We could divorce, but you shouldn’t have trampled over our already broken marriage by cheating, making me a laughing stock!”

She waited for Remington’s response, still clinging to a sliver of hope. She hoped he would tell her himself that Evelina’s child wasn’t his,

But there was only silence from behind her. Not a word from him. Lizetta’s tears fell. After a long while, feeling cold inside, she pried his hands off and sat up, only to find Remington had fallen asleep.

Whether he hadn’t heard her or had nothing to say, she couldn’t tell. Lizetta was exhausted and didn’t want to delve further.

She tucked him in and left the bedroom for the third-floor activity room. Pushing open the door, she was greeted by a huge claw machine.

It was many years old, its colors no longer bright, and it seemed out of place with the

So this thing, Lizetta got it when she was nine, thanks to Remington. She couldn't quite recall why she was down in the dumps back then, but anyway, Remington took her out to try her luck at the claw machine. End of the day, the siblings blew over 200 coins and didn't snatch a single fuzzball.

Lizetta ribbed him for his crappy skills, but Remington fired back, saying it was the claw machine's stingy odds that were to blame, not his technique.

Lizetta turned a deaf ear, and the next day, her super competitive brother lugged home this very claw machine, rigged it so the odds of winning were a solid 100%.

In no time, he snagged Lizetta a sofa's worth of plushies, and while she was secretly thrilled, she pouted and griped about him making her fave game boring.

Later, Remington whipped up a little odds-tweaking app on his phone, so he could switch up the chances whenever he wanted.

From then on, this claw machine turned into Lizetta's very own Doraemon. Feeling blue? She'd give it a whirl for a little pick-me-up. In high spirits? She'd take a shot; it'd drop a surprise.

When her birthday rolled around, she'd be buzzing with excitement, practically glued to the machine, wondering what would pop out.

After tying the knot and moving to Oakridge Heights from the Dashiell family villa, Lizetta didn't pack much – except for this claw machine.

Ever since her fallout with Remington four years back, she hadn't touched a single gift from that machine.

That was why it never crossed her mind that Remington would stash this year's present in there. She squatted down, fumbled around underneath, and sure enough, found a bunch of specially customized coins.

Half an hour later, Lizetta's floor was littered with gift boxes; all unwrapped, only four had something inside.

A wedding ring, earrings – stuff Remington must've slipped in over the past couple of days. And the other two? Her birthday present and their anniversary gift.

A swanky diamond–studded watch, a mini camera – Lizetta hit play and found a birthday message recorded just for her.

It were blessings from her idol, the music maestro in Celestia, Cash. The legend was 78 and hadn't made a public appearance in ages.

Scoring that birthday shout–out must've taken Remington some real elbow grease.

Clutching the camera, Lizetta was a cocktail of excitement from her idol's encouragement

and a deep, stirring emotion that wouldn't quit.

It was like a feather dropped in the lake of her heart, causing ripples that tickled her senseless, bringing an uncontrollable sweetness to her soul.

She decided to let bygones be bygones for the sake of the gifts, at least for now, and take good care of him.

Gifts in arms, she bounced back to the bedroom, all set to check if Remington's fever had broken, when rustling noises from the dressing room caught her ear.

A burglar? Not likely, with Oakridge Heights' tight security. Maybe Edith had found out Remington was sick?

Lizetta headed for the dressing room, snagging a feather duster off a low cabinet just in

case.

But what she saw inside was beyond her wildest It was Evelina.

guesses.

Drawer open, clutching a pair of men's undies, she spun around at the sound. Their eyes. locked, and Evelina looked gobsmacked.

"What are you doing here, Sis? Remington told me you'd moved out and asked me to look after him. I'm so sorry; had I known you were coming back, I wouldn't have intruded."

Lizetta felt her blood run cold, her grip on the feather duster shaking.

Remington's mistress had waltzed right in just like that. Catching her off guard, even as she was brimming with joy, like a bucket of ice water thrown on her scalding heart, ripping open a raw wound.

"How did you get in?!" She demanded.

Evelina smiled, "Well, someone gave me the code, of course. And to think it's my birthday – that sure was a surprise."

This was the home Lizetta and Remington shared after marriage, with a password set by him. Lizetta had always thought it was their birthdays and anniversary, but Evelina's words made her realize it could just as well be Evelina's birthday.

Lizetta felt like she was about to burst, her head buzzing.

But Evelina wasn't done twisting the knife, "Oh, and Sis, Remington isn't really into this brand of condoms – says they're not thin enough for a good feel. But have you two always been using protection? You've got quite the stockpile."

With that, Evelina fished a box from the drawer and waved it teasingly at Lizetta.